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Editorial

Religious ethnic foods

There are various types of ethnic foods, and they are often defined by ethnic groups, regions, cultures, and religion as mentioned in the *What is ethnic food?* article [1] published in the previous issue of *Journal of Ethnic Foods*. In this issue, we would like to focus on one of those types: religious ethnic foods. Religious ethnic foods contain cultural aspects such as food items or ritualistic processes followed by certain religious groups. They are also sometimes developed to avoid food taboos. Every community has a distinct dietary culture that symbolizes its heritage and sociocultural aspects of its ethnicity. Food prepared by different ethnic groups of people is unique and distinct due to the differences in geographical location, environmental factors, food preference, and availability of plant or animal sources. Customary beliefs, food rules and laws, religions, and social groupings are some of the characteristics contributing to the description of a culture, while ethnicity is the affiliation with a race, people, or cultural group [2]. Religions and customary beliefs exert a strong influence on food habits, particularly through food laws such as taboos imposed on consumptions of certain food items. Some ethnic foods have been mentioned in holy books such as the Bible, the Quran, and the Bhagavad Gita, as well as in Buddhist texts/scriptures. As a result, most of the ethnic foods are influenced by religion and taboo. First, we will start by briefly mentioning the characteristics of major religions, focusing on Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.

1. Buddhist foods

Orthodox Buddhists may avoid eating meat and fish out of respect for life [3]. However, nonvegetarian foods are not strictly forbidden. According to the Buddhist religious dietary code, if animal flesh is eaten, the animal should be killed by non-Buddhists. Monks are likely to be more restricted in their dietary practices than lay Buddhists, and they may avoid eating meat and fish. Monks do not eat anything solid in the afternoon. Fasting for the entire day is expected on the new moon and the full moon days each month. Buddhists usually eat together at home with their family.

The Chinese belief is a blend of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism [3]. Confucianism underlines the morality and behavior of people, including rites of passage, and Taoism provides for the needs and healing of the sick and is the basis for regulating festivals. Although Confucianism and Taoism do not provide guidelines for daily eating, the ancient food culture in China mostly contained the vegetarian diets. The Lunar New Year (Festival of Spring) is celebrated by a big gathering of family members and relatives, where they all share a banquet. Before eating, the Chinese celebrate the family's ancestors by offering sets of chopsticks, cooked rice in bowls, alcoholic drinks, and tea, which are placed at the family altar. This combination of Confucianism and Taoism influences the Chinese food culture.

Tibetan Buddhists usually eat noodles in soup, *skiu* or *momo* (small dumplings of wheat flour with meats), baked potatoes, *tsampa* (ground roasted barley grains), and so on [4]. Tibetan Buddhism does not restrict the consumption of animal flesh and alcoholic beverages. However, Tibetans do not eat small animals such as chickens, ducks, goats, and pigs, as they believe that taking the lives of many small animals is more sinful than killing a single large animal (yak and cow), which is more practical. Fish eating is uncommon among the Tibetan Buddhists, because they worship fish for longevity and prosperity. Nepali Buddhists also do not follow the dietary rules of Buddhism. Except Tamang and Sherpa, other communities of Nepali do not eat beef and yak. Nepali Buddhism is the fusion of Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism with a blend of nature and ancestor worship. Buddhists in South-East Asia eat fish and soybean products.

The introduction of Buddhism to Korea in the Goguryeo Kingdom (372 AD) and in the Silla Kingdom (528 AD), respectively, changed the food culture from animal-based foods to vegetable-based foods [5]. The people of the unified Silla Kingdom of Korea during the Koryŏ Dynasty (918–1392 AD) were orthodox Buddhists. During this period, meat consumption was prohibited and fermented soybean and vegetables being preferred [6,7]. Consumption of soybean as a food along with its fermented products in Japanese cuisine was due to the introduction of Buddhism in the 6th century [8]. Shintoism is the religion of early Japan and is still in practice. It is a blend of both Shintoism and Buddhism. In Shintoism, the ancestors are revered. Some Japanese homes still maintain two altars, a *kami* (ancestor) altar for life and its activities, and a Buddha altar for death and ancestral worship. Both altars are provided with fresh foods and saké by the Japanese for a good beginning to the day.

2. Christian foods

Certain food is symbolically used at the Eucharist, or Communion, by Christians. A wafer or bread is placed on the tongue (or in the hand) to represent the body of Jesus, and wine is drunk symbolizing his blood [3]. The apostle Paul is credited with freeing Christians from the diet laws practiced by the Jews, which thus served as a means of distancing the new Christian religion from the Jewish origins. In fact, the symbolic drinking of wine as a representation of the blood of Christ clearly was a significant departure from the strong avoidance of blood proscribed in the Jewish dietary laws. *Paska* is a special Easter bread that is prominent in Eastern

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Orthodox Church celebrations. The name of this bread reflects the fact that Jesus was crucified during the Jewish Passover. *Paska* is a sweet, yeast-leavened bread quite different from the unleavened *matzo* eaten during the Jewish Passover that symbolizes the exodus from Egypt [3]. In Eastern Europe, women bring their baskets containing foods to church for the Easter dinner so that the priest can bless them. Eggs are considered to be a symbol of the Resurrection of Christ, and are usually decorated and featured by Christians throughout North America and Northern Europe [2]. In Christian food culture, all family members sit together at a table and eat together after family prayers. Varieties of ethnic foods such as bread, cheese, and sausage constitute the cultural foods of most Christians, mostly in Europe, America, and Australia.

Judaism, considered as the root of Christianity, also has extremely strict dietary rules for kosher foods [9]. Kosher foods are not as abundant in the world as halal foods for Muslims due to the population size. However, the dietary laws for kosher foods are stricter than the dietary laws of halal foods.

3. Muslim foods

Like kosher, consumption of food is governed by the strict dietary laws for Muslims [10]. The following foods are prohibited: swine meat, the flesh of carrion (dead animals), blood in any form, food previously offered to Gods, and alcohol and any intoxicant. According to the dietary laws, Muslims foods are prepared without any alcoholic beverages. Traditionally, Muslims women and children may eat separately after the male members in their family finish their meals. During Ramadan, a month-long fasting, family members, friends, and relatives share common meals after sunset. In Sudan, traditionally at the time of the Ramadan, *hulu mur*, a traditional fermented sorghum bread drink is prepared by soaking sheets of leavened bread in a glass of water [11]. The drink is freshly prepared and drunk within 1 hour so that no measurable amounts of ethanol can be produced, making the product nonalcoholic, which is permitted during the Ramadan month [12]. Like kosher foods for the Jews, halal food laws have been enacted to maintain strict guidelines around Muslim foods [9]. Particularly, countries with large populations of Muslims such as Indonesia and Malaysia check for Halal Certification when importing foods from other countries.

4. Hindu foods

In the Bhagavad Gita, which is the sacred book of Hindus, foods are classified into three different types, namely, *sattvika*, *raajasika*, and *taamasika*, based on the property, quality, and sanctity, respectively. The sattvika food signifies prosperity, longevity, intelligence, strength, health, and happiness. This food type includes fruits, vegetables, legumes, cereals, and sweets. The raajasika food signifies activity, passion, and restlessness, which includes hot, sour, spicy, and salty foods. The taamasika food is intoxicating and unhealthy, which generally causes dullness and inertia. The Hindu foods follow the concept of purity and pollution, which determines interpersonal and intercaste relationships [13]. The Hindu Brahmin produces two types of meals, *kaccha*, which means uncooked and unripe, and *pakka*, which means ripe and cooked [14]. Kaccha foods are highly vulnerable to contamination and, therefore, there are strict codes for cooking, serving, and eating this food. The pakka food is fried, and so, it is not vulnerable. Hindus are traditionally vegetarians, but many non-Brahmins are nonvegetarians. Because the cow is considered sacred, beef is not eaten by Hindus. Fish is more acceptable than other animal flesh foods. Hindu Brahmins do not eat garlic, onion, and intoxicants. Foods are offered to temples for worshipping Gods and to free oneself from the possession of spirits. Feeding domestic and some wild animals including birds on religious occasions is a common practice. Ethnic foods have social importance for celebrations, especially during festivals and social occasions. Cooking is usually done by daughter-in-laws, daughters, and mothers. Vedic Indians take their meals in the sitting posture [15]. Traditionally, orthodox Hindu men avoid taking meals with their wives; women generally take their meals in the absence of male members. A custom of serving meals first to the elderly male members in the family is prevalent in the Hindu food culture. Traditionally, Hindu female family members eat afterwards.

5. Conclusion

We have briefly introduced some religious ethnic foods here. We have attempted to depict the traditions, skills, and cultures accordingly. However, a lack of research has prevented further discussion. There are many religions, however, and this article is limited to Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. In the future, given the opportunity, we would like to focus on ethnic foods of religious minorities. We hope to include further research on religious ethnic foods that consider the cultural, dietary, and functional aspects in *Journal of Ethnic Foods*. With further scientific research and analysis, it is our hope that people will embrace religious ethnic foods more.

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